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ABSTRACT

A study was done of college undergraduates' views of course syllabi as syllabi are generally the primary vehicles by which course instructors initially communicate plans, goals, and expectations to students. The study proceeded with an open-ended, one-question survey distributed to students in seven undergraduate classes from four different content areas. The data were collected over a six-semester period and a total of 194 responses were obtained. Of the respondents, juniors and seniors comprised 95 percent of the sample. The procedure for the survey was that in each class the syllabus was distributed on the first day of class with each part explained orally to the students. At the end of this class the survey was distributed and students were asked to complete the following statement: "When I received the course syllabus, the first thing I looked for was..." Responses were tabulated based on the key word or phrase. Results showed that the most prevalent response was that students first looked for examination dates, followed by the number of examinations, and topics covered in the course. This response supports development of a "nutshell" description which students rated favorably. (Four tables are included.) (JB)

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WHAT STUDENTS LOOK FOR IN COURSE SYLLABI



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WHAT STUDENTS LOOK FOR IN COURSE SYLLABI

Course syllabi, typically distributed on the first day of class, are the primary vehicles by which course instructors initially communicate plans, goals, and expectations to the students. The limited literature about course syllabi has focused on the contents, construction, and function of syllabi (see Abbleby, 1990; Altman, 1989; Boice, 1989; Lowther, Stark, & Martens, 1989; Rubin, 1985). For example, Appleby (1990) described seven purposes of course syllabi, 10 "essential components" of a syllabus, and another 10 questions about courses that are often not addressed in a syllabus (see Table 1).

Students' views of syllabi have not been considered. To help meet this end, an open-ended, one-question survey has been distributed to students in seven undergraduate classes. The information from these surveys is presented here.

METHOD

Subjects

The one-question survey was completed by students in seven classes, covering four different content areas, over a six-semester period (see Table 2). A total of 194 responses were obtained. Juniors and seniors comprised 95% of the sample.

Procedure

In each class, the syllabus was distributed on the first day of class, each part was explained orally to the students,

and questions were answered. At the conclusion of this first class, the survey was distributed. Students were asked to complete the following statement: "When I received the course syllabus, the first thing I looked for was..."

Data Analysis

Responses were tabulated based on the key word or phrase. If more than one was listed, the response tabulated was that one that was listed first, as per the instructions. Synonymous responses were combined.

Results were summed across courses and years, and are expressed as a percentage of the total. As the population of students in these courses was fairly homogeneous, no class differences were assessed.

RESULTS

The most prevalent response was that students first looked for examination dates (19.1%), followed in prevalence by the number of examinations (16%) and topics covered in the course (15.5%). Other responses, made by 5% or more of the students, included course requirements, whether or not there was a paper in the course, and grading procedures. All responses are presented in Table 3.

Students' responses to the survey prompted the construction of a one-page "nutshell" description for the Fall 1991 Physiological Psychology course. The nutshell description was distributed in conjunction with the regular syllabus on the first day of class. The nutshell description succinctly provided information about examinations (number, dates, format, point value) and papers

(format, length, due dates, point value) on the front (see Table 4), and on the reverse, information about the instructor (educational background, experience, and recent publications). Students evaluated the nutshell description at the end of the semester by assigning a letter grade (A through F) to the statement: Value of the "nutshell" description of course requirements as a way of knowing what to expect in the course. Conversion of letter grades to a numerical score produced a mean response of 3.7 on a 4.0 scale (N = 38; sd = 0.56).

DISCUSSION

According to students' responses, they initially sought information from the syllabi that was related to testing and course content. There was little initial concern expressed for other information, such as reading requirements, information about the instructor, course format, and attendance policies. The reduced concern for these latter topics could be due to the nature of the university and the department, which are both relatively small. Students were likely already knowledgeable about individual faculty and their teaching styles prior to taking a particular course, and many have previously taken a course (or two) from the instructor. Course-relevant information was likely obtained from other students, which would minimize knowledge sought from the syllabus on the first day of class. Encouraging frequent consultation of a syllabus to keep requirements in mind has been addressed by Smith (1991).

Students in the Introduction to Psychology course were excluded purposely from this survey. As many of the students in the Introductory course are first-year students, they have had little or no experience with college-level course syllabi, and perhaps no clear idea about what information they needed. It is possible that Introductory Psychology students might seek information from syllabi that is different from more advanced students.

Students' opinions of the nutshell description, collected at the end of the Fall 1991 semester, indicated that this format was judged a valuable way of communicating vital information. For instructors who typically provide detailed and extensive syllabi, a nutshell version might be a useful and valuable supplement to the regular syllabus that conveys to the students what they initially want to know about a course. This nutshell description would also be suitable for taping to the inside cover of textbooks, a procedure recommended by Smith (1991) to minimize the loss or misplacement of syllabi.

Course Syllabi 6

Author's Note

I thank Drew Appleby (Marian College) for providing copies of much of the relevant literature, as well as information about other literature, and C. Laurel Franklin (Loyola University) for tabulating the students' questionnaire and course evaluation responses.

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Table 1: Syllabi's Purposes, Components, and Unanswered

Questions

Purposes

-
1. To introduce yourself to students.
 2. To explain to students why they should take the course.
 3. To explain how students will be different after they complete the course.
 4. To explain the various aspects of the course.
 5. To help instructors plan and strengthen their courses.
 6. To communicate the nature and content of the course.
 7. To provide a documented record of an instructor's teaching career.

Essential Components

-
1. Basic identifying information.
 2. Instructor's personal information.
 3. Texts and other materials.
 4. Course descriptions.
 5. Course objectives.
 6. Course requirements.
 7. Grading procedures and scales.
 8. Academic honesty policy.
 9. Course calendar.
 10. Caveat

Unanswered Questions

-
1. Why should a student want to take the course?
 2. How and why does this course satisfy a requirement?
 3. What are the objectives of the course and why are they important?
 4. Does the course have prerequisites?
 5. Why is the course organized in the manner it is?
 6. What level of participation is required of students?
 7. How is the course related to other courses?
 8. Why have the text and/or materials been chosen?
 9. What is the purpose of assignments?
 10. What cognitive skills are required and evaluated in the course?

Note: From Appleby (1990).

Table 2: Classes/Courses Surveyed

Class	Semester	n
Physiological Psychology	Fall 1988	34
	Fall 1989	43
	Fall 1990	39
Comparative Psychology	Spring 1989	9
	Spring 1990	19
Environmental Psychology	Spring 1991	24
Health Psychology	Spring 1990	27

Table 3: Responses to Survey

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Exam dates	37	19.07
Number of exams	31	15.98
Course content and topics	30	15.46
Course requirements	13	6.70
Is there a paper?	11	5.67
Grading	11	5.67
Comic/Cartoon ^a	7	3.61
"Miscellaneous things"	7	3.61
Type of exams	6	3.09
Course objectives	6	3.09
Prerequisites	6	3.09
Course description	5	2.58
Textbook(s)	5	2.58
Information about instructor	3	1.55
Reading requirements	3	1.55
Course-related project	3	1.55
Cumulative final	3	1.55
Amount of work	3	1.55
Holidays	2	1.03
Attendance policy	1	0.52
Course format	1	0.52

^a There are usually several content-related cartoons included in the syllabus; students with experience with the instructor provided this response.

Table 4: Nutshell Description Distributed with Syllabus

PHYSIOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY: COURSE REQUIREMENTS IN A NUTSHELL

FALL 1991/DR. E. L. ZUCKER

- EXAMS: 4 (60 points each)
Dates: 9/16, 10/14, 11/11, 12/9
No cumulative final exam
20 multiple choice questions per exam
4 essay questions per exam
8-10 essay questions distributed in advance
4 questions randomly selected on exam day from list
- PAPERS: 3 short papers (1.5 pages maximum)
Summary of one recent research article per paper
Comparison of results of article with textbook information
Select 3 different topics from Parts II-VI of course
Do one paper from 3 of the 5 parts
Due dates: one week after conclusion of each part of course
20 points per paper